

U.S. Fire Administration

Youth Firesetting...

What You Can Do.

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FEMA



The Problem



Nationwide, more than half of all intentionally set fires are started by youths under the age of 18. Each year in this country fires set by children and adolescents are responsible for hundreds of fire deaths, thousands of painful burn injuries, and hundreds of millions of dollars in property loss according to the U.S. Fire Administration. Young children are also the victims in these fires. Fires set by children are common and a problem affecting many families. While curiosity about fire is natural, firesetting is dangerous and deadly. It is not safe to think that youth firesetting is only a phase.

Why Children and Adolescents Set Fires

Most experts agree that the best way to understand why fires are set is to look at the motivations for firesetting. Motives can involve curiosity, experimentation, a cry for help, thrill-seeking, willful intent to cause destruction, or from mental or emotional disorders.

Factors Influencing Firesetting

- **Easy access to lighters and matches**—In many homes where a child or adolescent was involved in starting a fire, they easily discovered the matches or lighter or knew exactly where to find them. If you smoke, always keep your matches or lighter in your pocket or in other secure locations. Inform your child that you will be randomly checking his/her pockets, backpacks, and rooms for matches and lighters.
- **Lack of supervision**—Providing supervision is important. Parents are often shocked to learn their child was engaged in firesetting over a prolonged period of time.
- **Failure to practice fire safety**—Young children, teens, and parents often lack understanding of the dangers associated with firesetting and safety rules about fire. Have clear rules rather than relying on vague threats or warnings.
- **Easy access to information on Internet**—Technology has made explicit media available to youths about many dangerous and often illegal activities for them to replicate.



What To Do If You Suspect Your Child Of Setting Fires

If your child is displaying firesetting behavior, you and your family are at a higher risk for suffering the consequences of fire. Remember, you are not the only parent ever to face this problem. Contact your local fire department immediately. Explain the situation to them. Many fire departments offer youth firesetting prevention and intervention programs.

Program Benefits Include:

- A contact person in your area.
- Determination of potential level of risk for repeat firesetting incidents.
- Fire education for the youth and their family.
- Referrals for additional services.

What Parents Can Do To Reduce Firesetting

- Supervision by adults decreases the opportunity to set fires.
- Teach children of all ages that fires, even small ones, can spread quickly.
- Teach young children that fire is a tool, not a toy, and only used by adults.
- Keep matches and lighters out of sight and out of reach.
- Always use fire with care and set a good example by using matches, lighters, and candles carefully.
- Teach children to show you when they find matches and lighters.
- Teach older children proper techniques for using fire.
- Point out to your children the fire safety rules you and others follow throughout the day.
- Talk to your children about the legal consequences of firesetting.



What Families Can Do To Prevent Fires

- Regularly inspect your home for fire hazards.
- Install and maintain working smoke alarms throughout your home.
- Plan and practice home fire escape drills that include two ways out from every room.
- Install residential sprinklers in your home.

What Communities Can Do

- Prevent firesetting in the first place by providing fire safety education from preschool through high school.
- Raise awareness in your community about youth firesetting.
- Form partnerships between local fire departments and private sector organizations to help support firesetting prevention and intervention programs.
- Support community-based programs to provide services such as fire safety education and counseling using community resources.
- Educate parents/caregivers and all who work with children about where they can go for help about firesetting.

For Further Information:

Visit the U.S. Fire Administration website at www.usfa.fema.gov or contact your local fire department.



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